



FROM CONTRACTORS TO CONDUITS: An Exploratory Dialogue among Funders and Evaluators

Convening Proceedings

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Background

On June 2, 2017, in Chicago, IL, 27 funders and evaluators from across the country met to discuss the current state of evaluation and learning in philanthropy, explore barriers to greater collaboration and impact, and identify approaches and strategies designed to build the collective capacity of small and mid-sized evaluation firms.

The meeting launched the exploration of three main concerns:

1 *Learning and evaluation in philanthropy is changing.*

Foundations are placing greater emphasis on achieving measurable results, and many are now tackling community and systems change work. This has challenged evaluators to develop new skills and approaches that go well beyond evaluating discrete programs.

2 *There are concerns about the usefulness and influence of evaluation.*

A recent study by the Center for Effective Philanthropy and the Center for Evaluation Innovation highlighted a number of challenges in philanthropic evaluation, including limitations in generating useful insights for the field, lessons for grantees, and meaningful insights for foundation staff. There is also a need for new voices and diverse perspectives to contribute to the field's thinking about equity issues facing our society.

3 *Building the evaluation field's capacity will require new levels of partnership.*

Small and mid-sized evaluation firms operate as intermediaries, providing services and products to strengthen foundations and the social sector. Because most operate as small businesses, however, they are not incentivized to collaborate, and are typically ineligible for foundation capacity-building support. Advancing the field will require new partnerships among evaluators and with funders.

Participants discussed these challenges, and identified what can be done individually and collectively to influence the factors shaping these issues and improve the overall environment for evaluation and learning in philanthropy. The discussion, which focused on small and mid-sized evaluation firms serving large regional and national foundations, was divided into three segments:

- **Philanthropic evaluation landscape**

Participants reflected on the current evaluation landscape in philanthropy by sharing feedback on a written document circulated prior to the meeting outlining “Nine Truths” about evaluation in philanthropy. While some truths are widely discussed, others are broadly recognized but rarely acknowledged in public discourse.

- **Factors shaping the landscape**

Next, they discussed factors shaping two important elements of philanthropic evaluation: (1) evaluator talent and (2) evaluation use and influence. Through facilitated exercises and activities, participants identified root causes that shape today’s landscape.

- **Action steps**

Participants brainstormed strategies designed to address factors shaping evaluation talent and influence. They plotted these strategies on an action priority matrix designed to identify quick wins that can be taken independently, along with major projects requiring further collaboration and resources (Appendix C). This process resulted in an emerging roadmap for action.

The conversations that occurred over the course of small and large group discussions were lively, illuminating, and rich. It is not possible to capture the many points and shades of nuance discussed. Instead, we provide an overview of the most salient themes from the conversations.

SECTION 1

TRUTHS AND REALITIES ABOUT EVALUATION IN PHILANTHROPY

The field of philanthropic evaluation has grown and developed tremendously over the past 25 years. However, evaluation has not evolved enough to keep up with current demands for information and insights that can truly accelerate social change. Below are nine “truths” about today’s evaluation landscape.¹

TODAY’S LANDSCAPE

1. High demand, changing needs

Philanthropic demand for evaluation is high and *what people define as evaluation is changing*. There is a greater emphasis on incorporating learning, strategic analysis, and community engagement into evaluation. This represents a departure from classic social science approaches that favor objectivity over in-depth engagement.

2. A complex marketplace

Evaluation encompasses a broad range of methodological approaches and philosophies. *Evaluators can do a better job working individually and together to help funders navigate and select approaches that best fit their context and needs*. This could help reduce inappropriate expectations for impact measurement commonly encountered in philanthropy.

TALENT NEEDS

3. Old skills, new skills

Both external consultants and in-house evaluation staff are expected to have wide-ranging skills that go well beyond traditional social science methodology. Being all things to all people may be an unreasonable challenge. *Quality research skills remain essential, even as foundations seek additional skills such as facilitation, equity, change management, adult learning, and systems thinking, etc.*

4. An apprenticeship model

Given the complexity of skills involved in evaluation consulting, talent development takes time, and the apprenticeship model employed by most firms works well. However, funders could do a better job *recognizing, accepting, and supporting firms’ talent development efforts*, especially since many funders hire former evaluation consultants as staff.

5. Need—and readiness—for diversity

The need for new voices and diverse perspectives in the evaluation field is broadly recognized as important to making progress on pressing equity issues. Along with this, *foundations must be ready to accept and value different ways of thinking and new perspectives*, or diversification efforts will fail.

¹ Text in italics represent core refinements to the original truths, identified by meeting participants.

USE AND INFLUENCE

6. Informing expectations

Evaluators are often excluded from early-stage conversations about impact measurement and program design, despite their technical knowledge of research and their experience assessing what's worked and what hasn't across programs. Funders can be *more flexible in their approach, and make space for evaluator feedback*, in both areas.

7. Competition over collaboration

Competition among evaluators impedes collaboration and knowledge-sharing that could advance the collective capacity of the field. While this is often true, part of the problem is that there is a *lack of structures or mechanisms that facilitate learning and collaboration among evaluators and with funders*.

8. Clients over field

Evaluation is heavily focused on the needs of individual clients, and thus rarely informs broader social change efforts. *Foundations should actively partner with evaluators to share findings* with their peers and communities with whom they work.

IMPLICATIONS

9. Changing how we work together

Addressing the above issues will require greater partnership among evaluators and with funders. *Unless something is done to change how evaluators and funders work together, current conditions will persist*.

SECTION 2

FACTORS SHAPING TALENT IDENTIFICATION AND DEVELOPMENT

Three primary factors shape talent needs and development (truths 3, 4, and 5) in evaluation. First, the *business model* employed by most evaluation consulting firms does not support in-depth talent development. Second, the ways in which evaluators are *educated and trained* affect who is in the talent pipeline, and the development opportunities they access. Third, the *receptivity of funders* to evaluators who bring diverse perspectives about race, gender, sexual orientation, and other issues is also a factor that shapes the field.



BUSINESS ISSUES

- Project budgets are typically too small to support mentoring of junior staff.
- The demands and pace of consulting make on-the-job learning and improvement difficult.
- Operating margins of small and mid-sized firms don't allow for in-depth career development.
- Firms typically do not share best practices and lessons learned regarding talent identification, development, and retention due to tremendous competition for talent.



EDUCATION AND TRAINING ISSUES

- Students are not necessarily aware of evaluation as a field; those who value working on the ground in communities may not find philanthropic work appealing.
- Training opportunities for practicing evaluators are typically not geared to evaluators working in philanthropy, and vary in both quality and utility.
- Existing pipeline development programs (e.g., GEDI and LEEAD) are not geared to the needs of small and mid-sized firms.
- Cultivating evaluators to work effectively outside the U.S., when they are located and trained in the U.S., can be challenging.



FUNDER READINESS

- Funders are not necessarily receptive to consultants with diverse backgrounds and ways of thinking.
- The culture of evaluation values objectivity; evaluators who come from diverse backgrounds and/or who bring a community-based perspective may be viewed as biased by foundation staff.

SECTION 3

FACTORS SHAPING EVALUATION USE AND INFLUENCE

When it comes to evaluation use and influence (truths 6, 7, and 8), three factors rise to the top in terms of shaping current conditions. First, there is a diversity of *consumer preferences* about evaluation that make the market hard to navigate. Second, multiple constraints inhibit *dissemination of findings* beyond individual clients. Finally, the transactional nature of *funder-evaluator relationships* impedes learning and improvement.



CONSUMER PREFERENCES

- Evaluation needs vary across foundation grantees, program and executive staff, and boards—making it difficult to meet the objectives of multiple audiences.
- There are diverse perspectives among funders about what constitutes a quality evaluation.
- Some foundation grantees, program and executive staff, and boards value quantitative measures over qualitative ones, yet not all areas of work or budget parameters lend themselves to quantitative measurement.
- Funders often care about attribution of findings to their investments, which is challenging in the context of complex systems.



DISSEMINATION

- Packaging research findings for outside audiences takes time and money. Most project budgets do not include funds for dissemination to others who could benefit from them.
- Foundations are not eager to share findings unless the initiative succeeded.
- Evaluations are often funded as contracts rather than grants, which limits funding and opportunities for dissemination.
- Operating margins of small and mid-sized firms typically do not support thought leadership.



NATURE OF FUNDER-EVALUATOR RELATIONSHIP

- There is a lack of shared learning spaces where funders and evaluators can come together to discuss insights and lessons learned. Leading conferences (e.g., Grantmakers for Effective Organizations and the Center for Effective Philanthropy) dedicated to improving philanthropic practice exclude evaluation firms, despite the important intermediary role many play.
- Foundations view their relationships with evaluation firms as contractual, rather than having a field-building mindset that values firms as essential partners.

SECTION 4

WHAT'S NEEDED

Rather than focusing on contracts with individual evaluators, foundations can better recognize evaluators as conduits of knowledge and as intermediary partners whose collective capacity is important to the field. The emerging roadmap (Appendix C) outlines how funders and evaluators can partner in new ways to address talent needs, and increase the relevance and impact of evaluation.

1 Infrastructure

If funders and evaluators are to work together in truly new ways, they need shared spaces where they can come together to learn, share insights, and talk openly about how to strengthen the collective capacity of the evaluation field. Multiple venues exist with potential to host such discussions, including the Evaluation Roundtable, Grantmakers for Effective Organizations (GEO), and the American Evaluation Association (AEA). Specific action steps include:

- Explore whether GEO would be willing to host joint conversations between foundations and evaluators about best practices and lessons in philanthropic evaluation.
- Explore whether the Evaluation Roundtable could play a role in supporting joint learning for evaluators and funders.
- Explore the role of other organizations in hosting convenings or supporting affinity groups for evaluators and funders (e.g., AEA, National Network of Consultants to Grantmakers).

2 Talent

Cultivating diverse talent within the evaluation field is important to funders and evaluation firms. Assessing the value and relevance of existing efforts is crucial to informing future strategies to identify and develop talent.

- Conduct user testing to assess the extent to which existing efforts (e.g., consultant rosters, talent pipeline programs) are meeting funder and evaluation firm needs.
- Develop strategies to better connect foundations with existing evaluator talent.
- Design strategies to support development of talent that embodies diversity, equity, and inclusion goals, and receptivity of foundations to this talent.

3 Communication

Sharing knowledge with others is important to maintaining and sustaining momentum on the issues outlined in this report.

- Share information and emerging insights from this dialogue with the broader philanthropic and evaluation fields.
- Ensure follow-through on near-term actions to build collaborative momentum, and test new ways of working, by coordinating with individuals who committed to take on next steps.
- Identify or develop a central hub for sharing evaluation designs and plans.

The Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation, in partnership with Equal Measure and Engage R+D, is committed to supporting future conversation, information-gathering, and knowledge exchange about how funders and evaluators can work together to build the collective capacity of philanthropic evaluation and learning. Most attendees signed on to lead or participate in action items, indicating early appetite and interest. Immediate next steps include reporting on this discussion at upcoming meetings and conferences, sharing the proceedings of this meeting, and developing funding to support shared action on the roadmap.

MEETING PARTICIPANTS

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*Participants joining by phone.

The convening was hosted by Rebekah Levin of the McCormick Foundation

THE NINE TRUTHS

The following statement, authored by Meg Long and Clare Nolan, was circulated in advance of the meeting.

The field of evaluation has grown and developed tremendously over the past 25 years. However, evaluation has not evolved enough to keep up with current demands for information and insights that can truly accelerate social change. Below we layout nine “truths” about today’s evaluation landscape along with a vision for what’s needed to strengthen this important field.

TODAY’S LANDSCAPE OF EVALUATION

- 1. Demand for evaluation is high and growing.** Foundations, government agencies, nonprofits, and other social change stakeholders recognize the value of identifying intended results, developing strategies aligned with these results, and evaluating progress. Along with this demand, expectations for what evaluation can do are growing. The need for traditional evaluation to “prove” the merit of a program or investment persists. However, well beyond evaluating discrete programs or interventions, evaluators are tackling increasingly complex topics such as systems change, scale, and broader community change efforts. As such, the distinctions between evaluation, learning, strategy-setting, stakeholder engagement, and other ways of collecting, interpreting, and applying new knowledge and information are increasingly blurring.
- 2. Different approaches to affecting social change require different evaluation approaches.** These range from rigorous impact studies designed to build the evidence base to developmental evaluations that can inform learning and strategy. They also include action research that promotes community participation, learning processes to promote the application of findings, and dashboards that respond to the accountability needs of Boards and other stakeholders. As a result, consumers can have very different interpretations of what “evaluation” means, resulting in varied expectations and challenges navigating and making sense of this varied evaluation landscape.
- 3. Evaluators are often invited late to the social change party.** To be most effective, evaluation should be addressed as strategies are developed, investment decisions made, initiatives launched, and grants awarded. Too often, promises of outcomes and impact have already been stated and approved by Board members, executive leaders, program officers, and implementing partners. This leads different stakeholders to have pre-defined and often inappropriate expectations for evaluation of their work, unsurprisingly leading to disappointment in the results.

TALENT NEEDS WITHIN THE FIELD

- 4. Evaluation skills have moved beyond social science.** The increased demand for evaluation overall and interest in different evaluation approaches means that evaluators and firms must have wide-ranging and diverse skill sets. Beyond classic social science research methods, these include working knowledge and experience in technical assistance and capacity building, business strategy, communications, design thinking, return on investment, management consulting, organizational development, facilitation of learning, and community engagement. These skill sets are rarely found within a single individual or firm.

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5. **The field relies on an apprentice model of career development.** While most evaluators develop technical research skills and content knowledge in graduate programs, the full suite of skills necessary to be an effective evaluator – such as understanding the philanthropic and social change sectors, leading consultative processes, developing learning agendas and tools – requires an “apprenticeship-based” model for talent development within firms or fellowship programs. Accelerating the transfer of knowledge and skills is essential to meeting the growing and diverse needs of the field.
 6. **There is a need for new voices and diverse perspectives in evaluation.** Like other aspects of the social sector, structural racism and other forms of oppression also impact the evaluation field. Despite growing efforts to bring individuals with diverse lived experiences and perspectives into the field, it remains far too homogeneous. There is a need to recruit and develop evaluators with diverse backgrounds and experiences that can contribute their thinking to the major equity issues facing our society. Achieving this goal will require new approaches to talent development, workforce pipeline cultivation, and retention.

MARKET FORCES EXACERBATE THE SITUATION AND IMPEDE BROADER SECTOR INFLUENCE

7. **Competition among evaluators impedes collaboration and knowledge-sharing.** The high demand for evaluation has resulted in a cottage industry of firms and individuals. Evaluators, in stiff competition with one another, can be incentivized to overstate what’s possible to measure in order to secure work, rather than having more honest conversations about what evaluation approaches are appropriate and feasible. These market forces also impede collaboration and knowledge exchange that can advance the quality of evaluations and contribute to low application of findings.
8. **A single-user focus limits the benefits of evaluations.** Evaluation is heavily focused on the needs of a single audience, the client, and rarely has the opportunity to shape social change fields and thought leadership efforts. These market forces are at odds with the growing focus on collaborative and collective impact social change efforts aimed at reducing redundancy and increasing social impact.

CHARTING A NEW COURSE

9. **To make change, evaluation must change.** We believe evaluation has a key role to play in the social sector. Evaluators bear witness to how strategies and initiatives developed in government offices or foundation conference rooms play out in the real world. We have critical insights about what works and what doesn’t, common mistakes and patterns that perpetuate poor outcomes, and the tools and approaches that can lead to sustainable impact. To increase our field’s impact, we need to overcome barriers to collaboration and knowledge-sharing that impede talent development and field influence.

In response...

Given these “truths,” we are posing a challenge to our funders and social change partners to:

- » Help reduce market redundancies and unnecessary competition by building stronger incentives for evaluators and firms to collaborate in a way that moves well beyond subcontracting and transactional relationships. Support like-visioned evaluation firms to build the necessary infrastructure and processes to work together in partnership – improving knowledge- and skill-sharing, and driving higher quality and better responsiveness to evaluation stakeholder needs and expectations.
- » Recognize that evaluation firms need to become part of the solution to build a more diverse and inclusive evaluation field, and that adopting diversity, equity, and inclusion policies and practices and holding ourselves accountable for these requires organizational investments that are rarely covered in contracts or grants.
- » Help evaluation firms share talent development, knowledge management, and communications and thought leadership “back office” functions to deepen the quality – and lower the costs – of running an evaluation practice.
- » Build thought leadership requirements and appropriate resources into every evaluation engagement to ensure that what we learn can benefit the fields in which we work, and not just the individual clients with whom we work.
- » Help ensure that evaluation partners are brought to the table at the same time as strategists, so expectations are aligned and realistic.

Helping to improve this level of collaboration, knowledge- and skill-sharing, and diversification and retention of talent can improve quality, increase the application of our evaluation findings, and advance field-level learning that taken together will help increase the impact of the social investments and drive the social change we are collectively seeking.

ROADMAP FOR ACTION: PRIORITY MATRICES

<p style="writing-mode: vertical-rl; transform: rotate(180deg);">IMPACT ON TALENT</p> <p style="text-align: right;">HIGH</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support a community of practice for talent and operational best practice sharing • Build resources for talent development into existing contracts/grants • Recruit for entry level positions from places that provide diverse candidates • Recruit from graduate schools/universities in different fields • Host convenings to tackle development; invite graduates of GEDI, Evaluation Fellows, AECF/LEEAD • Provide funding for evaluation firms to cover internships and capacity building 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organize space to share designs, reports, etc., to build early career skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Influence Master’s Degree/postsecondary preparation programs • Develop shared professional development sequences for small/mid-sized firms • Design an evaluation “clearinghouse,” or work with AEA to refine current screening and posting of evaluators • Build training institutions in the Southern Hemisphere • Employ a network approach to help bright and talented consultants, as well as small firms, augment their business capacity and reach • Provide resources to support an infrastructure for professional development, mentoring, retention, hands-on opportunities, and dissemination of what works (knowledge building) • Develop a co-op or consortium of evaluators that work with philanthropy; benefits include 1) expanded skills; and 2) more relevant evaluation products • Reinvest some revenue toward talent development, framed with an equity lens • Offer additional resources and supports to incentivize evaluation firms to partner and collaborate, and not just sub-contract; ensure these resources support shared planning, organizational management, etc. • Develop an “EPIE” Emerging Practitioners in Evaluation program and connect it to EPIP – Emerging Leaders in Philanthropy • Underwrite an annual fellowship for consulting firms to increase diversity
	<p style="text-align: right;">LOW</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">LOW</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">HIGH</p>
	<p>LEVEL OF EFFORT (time, resources)</p>		

Roadmap for Action: Priority Matrices

<p style="writing-mode: vertical-rl; transform: rotate(180deg);"> HIGH IMPACT ON RELEVANCE AND INFLUENCE LOW </p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support a community of practice to support exchange of field-advancing ideas • Ensure that evaluation partners are established at the same time as strategy and technical assistance firms • Ensure that thought leadership resources are included in all evaluation engagements • Improve timing of evaluation engagements to align with strategy • Create an “Evaluation Roundtable” for foundation staff and evaluation teams • Convene evaluators regularly to learn together and from each other • Organize presentations to showcase variety of evaluation practices to foundation staff and leadership • Commission case-studies to showcase how evaluation has influenced philanthropic practice and strategy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop space for sharing designs and reports with curation • Encourage programs to anticipate, plan for, and recruit strategically for evaluations • Allocate funding to develop knowledge products (based on evaluation results) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Share onboarding practices, with a focus on how those practices build evaluative thinking
	<p>LOW</p>	<p>LEVEL OF EFFORT (time, resources)</p>	<p>HIGH</p>